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## Realizing Reason in History: How Cunning Does It Have to Be?

Réal Robert Fillion

The expression, "Realizing Reason in History," has at least two senses, both of which Hegel tries to bring out in his philosophy of history. The first suggests that there *is* reason in history. That is, the task of the philosopher is to show how reason has developed itself through history. The second sense suggests that, not only does history *show* us that reason has developed over time, but the *task* of history is precisely to develop or realize reason *in* time. There is reason in history because that is what history brings about. Thus, the "realization" of reason in history is both something that is recognized and something that must be done. This "realization" is accomplished, willy-nilly, through the doings and sufferings of concrete human beings. Hegel wants to show that history is not a cold, anonymous process which simply sweeps up human lives and never looks back. Indeed, his philosophy of history is primarily concerned with the concrete doings and sufferings of human beings, and wishes to rescue from meaninglessness all those ephemeral human lives which populate the historical process. That, according to Hegel, is what the philosophy of history is all about.

This may come as a surprise to those who, when they think of Hegel, especially insofar as history is concerned, think of the "cunning of reason," thus conjuring up images of a deceitful, unfeeling Absolute, tricking and using innocent human lives in order to accomplish its own ends. There are in fact many different places in Hegel where such an image finds ample textual justification. An obvious example of such a text can be found in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, where Hegel's eloquence is matched only by the seeming repulsiveness of his images – at least for some of us. For example, here is one way that Hegel characterizes the historical process:

Particular interests contend with one another, and some are destroyed in the process. But it is from this very conflict and destruction of particular things that the universal emerges, and it remains unscathed itself. For it is not the universal Idea which enters into opposition, conflict, and danger; it keeps itself in the background, untouched and unharmed, and sends forth the particular interests of passion to fight and wear themselves out in its stead. It is what we call the *cunning of reason* that it sets the

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passions to work in its service, so that the agents by which it gives itself existence must pay the penalty and suffer the loss. For the latter belong to the phenomenal world, of which part is worthless and part is of positive value. The particular is as a rule inadequate in relation to the universal, and individuals are sacrificed and abandoned as a result. The Idea pays the tribute which existence and the transient world exact, but it pays it through the passions of individuals rather than out of its own resources.<sup>1</sup>

It is passages like this one which are cited when Hegel is condemned for totally obliterating the self-worth of individual human beings, a self-worth whose recognition was achieved only after a long struggle. Moreover, it is claimed, for all his talk of freedom, Hegel has effectively *denied* freedom, that is, the freedom that counts, the freedom of individual human beings. *This* is what many of us find so repulsive about the kind of characterization of the historical process Hegel here seems to be offering us. Leaving aside the civilized but more or less empty accusations of its "sheer speculativeness" and "unempiricity," what is really at stake is that most of us do not take kindly to being regarded as the mere playthings of *anything*, let alone of some kind of mysterious Absolute. We understand ourselves to be free, conscious, responsible agents, in charge of what we are and what we do. In other words, we view ourselves as autonomous (Freud *et al.* notwithstanding). Because of this, we are rather touchy when we read such things as the passage cited above. It seems to deny everything we believe ourselves to be.

Touchiness is fine, of course; it can even denote a certain measure of sensitivity. But as well as being sensitive, it is good to be sensible also, and not condemn what we have not as yet attempted to understand. The first clue that the traditional reaction to Hegel's conception of the "cunning of reason" is misguided is the insufficient attention paid to the actual words Hegel uses. In the passage cited above, Hegel writes that it is what *we may call* the cunning of reason that ... Some commentators have pointed out that this way of phrasing the matter suggests that the idea of the cunning of reason serves merely as an illustration of the point Hegel is trying to make, and should not be construed as what best characterizes his philosophy of history.<sup>2</sup> In many ways Hegel's philosophy would make more sense if it *did not* have this image of the cunning of reason included in it. At least his views would then be seen to mesh more harmoniously with our own traditional self-image (which in large part stems from the Enlightenment).

Although overemphasizing the image of the cunning of reason distorts what Hegel says, leaving it completely out of the picture is just as distortive, if not more so. We have to come to terms with it. In order to do this we must not mix it up with what it is not. Obviously, it bears resemblance to many similar concepts in the tradition such as Providence, Pre-Established Harmony, Fortune, Fate, the Invisible Hand; and, indeed, Hegel is well aware of this.

1. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. by H. B. Nisbet with an intro. by Duncan Forbes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 89.

2. For example, Denise Souche-Dagues makes this point in her *Le cercle hégélien* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1986), p. 148.

Since his "cunning of reason" is a member of this family, as it were, of concepts, it shares certain characteristics while possessing its own distinctions.

The most obvious distinction, of course (although it is rarely pointed out), is Hegel's use of the word 'cunning' (*List*). Its use has no doubt contributed to the abuse heaped upon Hegel, for it connotes deceit and dishonesty. But these are by no means its only connotations, nor need they be the most important ones. The idea of "cunning" also suggests skill and dexterity, the ability to achieve our ends no matter how unlikely or unconducive the conditions may be. It indicates a certain resourcefulness, even if somewhat unscrupulously applied. We use "cunning" in order to get around the brutality and undeniable force or strength of that which would otherwise stand in our way. The symbol of the idea of "cunning" is the fox, that quick, sharp-witted, snickering creature we often find ourselves cheering on despite ourselves. With good reason too, for we, like the fox, must constantly rely on our wits in order to survive in what often seems like a hostile environment.

It is this dimension of the idea of "cunning" which underlies Hegel's use of the expression, and it is precisely this dimension which distinguishes Hegel's "cunning of reason" from those other somewhat similar concepts such as Providence, Fate, etc. mentioned above. Reason is cunning because it manages to survive and even flourish in a world rent through and through with the unreflective self-centeredness of individual human beings. Not only does it survive, it actually *uses* that self-centeredness as the *means* by which it achieves its own ends. Just what are the ends of reason? Those which human beings recognize (upon philosophical reflection) as having been duped into accomplishing despite themselves. Herein lies Hegel's genius in using a concept such as the *cunning* of reason in order to express what was inadequately expressed through concepts such as Fate or Providence. The *cunning* lies precisely in that it is *recognized* (and the difference for Hegel lies precisely in this element of recognition), thereby establishing *its* ends as *our own*, even though we did not notice them. Thus, Hegel's view is actually *opposed* to any view which would make us out as the mere playthings of something outside or apart from us. Reason cannot survive outside of us, as it were; therefore, it must use considerable skill and dexterity in order to get us to achieve its own ends, especially its own self-recognition. Reason has no eyes of its own; it can only see itself through ours.

But before I break into Hegelianese, perhaps this is a good place to pause and consider the similarities and dissimilarities which Hegel's conception of the "cunning of reason," as so far described, has with a conception of history proposed by Kant in an essay entitled "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View."<sup>3</sup> The two conceptions put forward by Kant and Hegel bear a striking resemblance, so much so that a recent critic has claimed that, although there is a major and crucial difference between the two, it is not so much one of *content* as of the *status* of the claims put forward.<sup>4</sup> There is obviously much truth to this, as we shall see; however, I do not think it goes to the heart of the matter.

3. Immanuel Kant, *On History*, ed. by Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), pp. 11-26.

4. Luc Ferry, *Philosophie politique 2: le système des philosophies de l'histoire* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1986), p. 84.

First of all, a major distinction between Kant and Hegel is that Kant's conception might be called, as Yovel says, a "cunning of *nature*" rather than a "cunning of *reason*."<sup>5</sup> Kant is concerned with history not as the self-unfolding of an Absolute, as is Hegel, but as the arena of human activity and development. What impresses Kant is that out of such a messy and seemingly hopeless motley of activities and events, one can still discern a *kind* of development or progression or evolution. Kant writes on p. 12:

One cannot suppress a certain indignation when one sees men's actions on the great world-stage and finds, beside the wisdom that appears here and there among individuals, everything in the large woven together from folly, childish vanity, even from childish malice and destructiveness. In the end, one does not know what to think of the human race, so conceited in its gifts. Since the philosopher cannot presuppose any [conscious] individual purpose among men in their great drama, there is no other expedient for him except to try to see if he can discover a natural purpose in this idiotic course of things human. In keeping with this purpose, it might be possible to have a history with a definite natural plan for creatures who have no plan of their own.

Kant is not claiming to be offering a description of the actual historical process, but instead is putting forward a *hypothesis* which is ultimately to serve a *practical* purpose. This hypothesis, of course, resembles Hegel's conception in that human beings are duped into doing what is good for themselves while being motivated by sheer self-interest. This arises out of what Kant calls "the unsocial sociability of men," and his claim is that "the sources of unsociableness and mutual opposition from which so many evils arise, drive men to new exertions of their forces and thus to the manifold development of their capacities" (p. 16). This is an acute and interesting observation. On the basis of it, Kant goes on to formulate his hypothesis, stated for example in the "Eighth Thesis" of his "Idea for a Universal History," namely, that the "history of mankind can be seen, in the large, as the realization of nature's secret plan to bring forth a perfectly constituted state as the only condition in which the capacities of mankind can be fully developed, and also bring forth that external relation among states which is perfectly adequate to this end" (p. 21). Again, it is important to stress that Kant is not making a claim about the actual historical process; he is not indulging in a *a priori* history in that sense. Essentially, he is proposing a hypothesis whose "proof" lies in the practical sphere. For while it might appear "strange and apparently silly to wish to write a history in accordance with an Idea of how the course of the world must be if it is to lead to certain rational ends" given the fact that "we are too blind to see the secret mechanism of its workings, this Idea may still serve as a guiding thread for presenting as a system, at least in broad outlines, what would otherwise be a planless conglomeration of human actions" (p. 24). Thus, Kant is not open to the same criticism as Hegel, for his conception of the "cunning of nature" is a regulative idea and makes no ontological claim about the historical

process. The use of the expression is, as Yovel points out, "metaphorical, based upon an analogy with human works; but the use of this analogy is indispensable, since we could not otherwise grasp the phenomenon of history as a sphere with its own distinctive characteristics" (p. 165).

One might rightly be impressed by this brief and seductive philosophical account of history proposed by Kant; but, according to Hegel, it is fundamentally flawed, not least because, although purporting to deal with history, it actually leaves the *phenomenon* of history completely aside. Kant wishes to explain or render significant the *course* of history understood as a whole, but in order to do this, he appeals to a criterion which stands outside history. That is, Kant's contribution to the idea of *history* is that he characterizes it as secretly guided by *nature*, and not by anything that could be considered as intrinsic to the historical process. The reason for this, of course, is because Kant does not want to give the historical process any kind of independent ontological status. Hence his hypothetical call to nature as a condition for rendering it intelligible.

Hegel rejects this approach precisely because it fails to account for the philosophical significance of the historical process, i.e., it introduces an *external* criterion for judging this process. For Hegel, who wants to understand history as having philosophical consequences, it is therefore important to show that the historical record exhibits, not a secret "plan of *nature*" but the "cunning of *reason*." The criterion by means of which the historical process is to be judged must be seen as arising out of the historical process itself, and must belong to that process. It cannot be imported from without, nor can it simply be assumed. It has to be *real* if it is to be effective.

Thus, according to Hegel, Kant's intentions were good, and his insight into the *purpose* of a philosophy of history was right, insofar as he saw it as bringing some sense into the otherwise pretty dismal spectacle of human history, and Kant did this with the Enlightenment's conviction that the future promised more good than the past. The point Hegel makes, and here he shows his superior understanding of the very *idea* of history, is that we cannot *bring* sense to history, we can only *discern* it. What Kant and the Enlightenment failed to understand was that *by definition* only the future can "promise" the possibility of a better world. However, only the past is capable of revealing what the world has so far achieved.

Thus, the ideas of a "cunning of nature" and the "cunning of reason" are in fact radically different. When Hegel says that reason displays "cunning" in achieving its end, he means that this is something that goes on *within* the historical process.

However, because to say that the realization of the ends of reason is intrinsic to the historical process is still not to say *whose* ends we are talking about (at least not unambiguously), we are not out of the woods yet. Kant, for his part, made this point abundantly clear: The ends to be realized in history are not those of any particular human being but those of the human race. Hegel talks about the ends of reason, but surely to say the ends of *reason* are working themselves out in history is a somewhat poetic way of saying something else. What indeed does it mean to say that history is the self-actualization of Absolute Spirit? In order to get clear about this, we will have to turn to Hegel's *Logic* where he mentions this notion of the "cunning of reason" in the section he devotes to the conceptual elaboration of the notion of "Teleology."

5. Yirmishu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 165.

As we are concerned with the "ends" of reason, the notion of "teleology" is clearly relevant. However, let it be noted that the discussion Hegel provides in this section is meant to provide a clue – but only a clue – to understanding what he means by the "ends" of reason.

What does *Hegel* mean by the concept of "teleology"? First of all, where is it placed in his *Logic*? It follows the sections on "Mechanism" and "Chemism" which are the main categories that deal with the *external* world, or nature. It not only follows these sections but also completes the general treatment of "Objectivity" and thus leads to the final section of the Doctrine of the Concept, which deals with the Idea. This is why, of course, this section only provides a *clue* to what Hegel is trying to demonstrate. For as far as Hegel is concerned the concept of teleology is a progressively more adequate but not yet complete characterization of the Concept or Idea. This is helpful to some, gibberish to others. Of course, what most of us mean by teleology is explanation by reference to an end. For example, to describe a particular activity as "goal-directed" is to give a "teleological" characterization of that activity insofar as any complete explanation will have to make explicit reference to the goal of the activity; i.e., something which lies at the *end* of the process but which still is understood is the guiding factor throughout the process. Another concept which is connected with the teleological approach to explaining phenomena is that of *purpose*; i.e., something is explained teleologically when we show how it serves as the means toward a particular purpose or end. This particular characterization is in many ways responsible for the bad name teleological explanation has, especially in the natural sciences. Hegel gives an example of the misuse of "teleological" explanation "when not only the vine is considered under the aspect of the well-known utility that it has for men, but the cork-tree too is considered in its relation to the stoppers cut from its bark in order to seal the wine-bottles."<sup>6</sup> Such misuse, however, in no way reflects the actual richness of the concept of teleology. What we must do is draw a distinction between *external* and *internal* purposiveness. That is, the relation that teleology describes is one in which the purpose or end is *externally* related to the means. A sense of teleology, in which the end has an internal relation to the means, had been brought out by Kant, but it was already present in Aristotle, and according to Hegel, it clearly "stands infinitely far above the concept of modern teleology which had only finite, or external purposiveness in view" (*EL*, § 204, Remark). However, the *modern* characterization of teleology holds that "things are held not to bear their determination within themselves, but to count merely as *means*, which are used up in the realization of a purpose that lies outside of them" (*EL*, §205, Addition). Now, having mentioned this, I will be the first to admit that it sounds an awful lot like what Hegel wrote about the "cunning of reason" in the passage from the *Philosophy of History* quoted at the beginning of this paper. Remember that there the cunning of reason "sets the passions to work in its service, so the agents by which it gives itself existence must pay the penalty and suffer the loss." But Hegel, in this section on "Teleology," wants to show that an *external* approach, while it certainly has proven to be useful on occasion, "does not suffice for a genuine insight into the nature of things" (*EL*, §205, Addition). What is needed is an *internal* approach. But how are we to reconcile this requirement with the ap-

6. G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, trans. by Theodore Geraats, H. S. Harris, and W. A. Suchting (forthcoming), § 205, Addition; hereafter cited as 'EL'.

parent expendability of particular human lives associated with the idea of the "cunning of reason"? Perhaps the beginning of an answer may be discerned in such remarks as the following: "Certainly finite things as such must be given their due by being regarded as not ultimate and as pointing beyond themselves. *But this negativity of finite things is their own dialectic, and if we are to (re)cognize this, we must involve ourselves first of all in their positive content*" (*EL*, §205, Addition; my emphasis). This passage is important, not only for understanding the concept of teleology, but for understanding what Hegel takes the historical process to be. Perhaps this can best be illustrated by comparing, once again, Hegel's conception of the "cunning of reason" with Kant's conception of the "cunning of nature." For Hegel, the "negativity of finite things" serves, as it does for Kant, to bring about the ultimate end. This end, however, for Kant is infinitely far removed, i.e., unattainable, whereas for Hegel this end must be in some way implicit, because for Hegel this negativity is dialectical. It is through this process of negating human lives (which is one way of looking at the historical process, one which drove Kant to postulate the hypothetical "secret design of nature") that the end is made explicit. Thus, for Hegel, the "end" is not in some infinitely distant beyond, but is already present in the "positive content" of any given finitude. The "story" of history is not a postulated story whose moral is meant to be put into practice, as it is for Kant, but the "story" of what has actually already taken place. The "cunning of reason" lies in the fact that it has not only survived the spoils of time, but actually realized itself progressively as well.

Perhaps a good way to show how the notion of teleology illustrates this idea of the cunning of reason is to follow d'Hondt's suggestion to distinguish between two senses of this "cunning": first the "cunning of human beings" in the face of natural forces; then the "cunning of reason" *per se*, which finds itself "faced" with human passions (which can also be understood as natural forces, but which prove to be the motor of history).<sup>7</sup> As stated above, teleology is concerned with the relations between means and end insofar as the end itself is understood in terms of *purpose*. To consider first the "cunning of human beings," the concern is therefore with human purposes. Human beings are a part of nature, that is, we are finite, and like any other finite things we are subject to particular constraints and limitations. For example, human beings have to contend with a variety of natural forces, some found outside ourselves (like the weather), others found within ourselves (like hunger). We can succeed in these contentions in a variety of ways. The *cunning* of human beings consists in our ability to use natural forces in such ways that we can make *them* do what *we* want, while we simply sit back and enjoy the results. We can harness natural processes by means of a variety of devices so that we do not have to exert ourselves with mind-numbing, back-breaking activities. If human beings had not invented the windmill, we would still have to exhaust ourselves turning the wheel on our own. Thus, while still subject to those natural forces, by means of our *cunning*, we humans can "turn" those natural forces to our own advantage. Humans, the *rational* animals, although only a relatively small part of the world, can by the use of our reason make the forces of the world

7. Jacques d'Hondt, "Téléologie et Praxis dans la Logique de Hegel," in *Hegel et la pensée moderne*, ed. by Jacques d'Hondt (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1970), p. 23. He discusses the same idea in his *Hegel, philosophe de l'histoire vivante* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1987), p. 337.

work for us, indeed, even protect us from their very magnitude. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel expresses it this way:

The finitude of rationality has ... this side, that the end enters into relationship with the presupposition, that is, with the externality of the object. In the *immediate relation* to the object, it would itself enter into the sphere of mechanism or chemism and thereby by subject to contingency and the loss of its determination as the Notion that is in and for itself. But as it is, it puts forward an object as means, allows it to wear itself out in its stead, exposes it to attrition and shields itself behind it from mechanical violence.<sup>8</sup>

We may grant, and even to some extent admire, human "cunning" in our dealings with nature, but it will not do to leave things at that. This would be to approach our dealings with nature merely externally, as though our *purposes* in dealing with nature were predetermined and unalterable. This would be to understand humankind as a closed and finished product. However, the whole point of the discussion is to show that such a conception is mistaken, insofar as a curious and highly revealing particularity of human beings is that they may use different means in order to achieve different ends; and because the relation of human beings to nature is *internal*, the means themselves reverberate back on the ends sought. The result is that it is often the case that the means themselves turn out to be of more worth than the ends for which they were devised. Hegel points out that "the *plough* is more honourable than are immediately the enjoyments procured by it and which are ends. The *tool* lasts, while the immediate enjoyments pass away and are forgotten. In his tools man possesses power over external nature, even though in respect of his ends he is, on the contrary, subject to it" (*SL*, p. 747).

What we are witnessing here, of course, is what might be called the transition from the "cunning of human beings" to the "cunning of reason." For us humans, satisfying our desires and needs actually produces instruments which, *without our having intended this result*, turn around to shape and refine those desires and needs. (Indeed, consumer society provides an – alas! – perfect illustration of this process.) It is in this sense that the products of what we call "civilization" i.e., art, religion, science, which ultimately stem from our finite strivings, turn around to shape and direct those strivings toward ends which are themselves not finite. *This* is the sense of the "cunning of reason" which Hegel is talking about in, for example, *EL*, § 209, Addition:

Reason is as *cunning* as it is *mighty*. Its cunning generally consists in the mediating activity which, while it lets objects act upon one another according to their own nature, and wear each other out, brings only *its* own purpose to execution without itself mingling in the process. In this sense we can say that with regard to the world and its process, divine Providence behaves with absolute cunning. God lets men, who have their particular passions and desires, do as they please, and what results is the

accomplishment of *his* intentions, which are something other than those whom he uses were directly concerned about.

Hegel here uses, as he often does, the idea of divine Providence as an *illustration* or a pointer to the *idea* he is trying to develop (understandably, because religion for Hegel communicates by means of representational images). Or, put otherwise, Hegel recognizes the *insight* contained in the religious conception of divine Providence and is trying to render this insight explicit. For the religious person (who believes in divine Providence) what, I suspect, is being expressed in this idea is the belief that the *true* or *good* ends of all human life are embodied in God, and that even despite one's creaturely (i.e., finite or "fallen") status, one is, through God's grace, directed toward those true and proper ends. Hegel recognizes the truth contained in this religious framework and seeks to explicate it *philosophically*. Thus, for Hegel, the true and proper ends of human life are the product and expression of reason. What reason? Whose reason? Absolute Reason, Infinite Reason, that Reason which no finite being possesses but in which all finite human beings partake. Of course, all of this is not immediately apparent from the perspective of a finite being. Tell people that the source and end of human life is Reason, and they will scoff at you. They will tell you that they do not know what the source of human life is, and that the only end they know is that of survival. Indeed, it would not be unreasonable for them to say this. On the contrary, it is a position that has been developed and defended precisely in the name of human rationality. However, a few moments reflection will show that this (finite) position is far from adequate. (What follows here also serves to show the ultimate inadequacy of the concept of "teleology.") Because, obviously, survival cannot, in the end, be the goal of life, given that the achievement of that goal or end is doomed to failure, simply because we are mortal. Survival in this world is not our true end, for we are born to this world and must die to this world. Or, in rather less oratorical words, the idea of survival is an abstract and unattainable ideal; one that does not arise out of the process but is posited abstractly as an unattainable end. However, having said that, we must recognize that, as the old saying goes, each of us must die our own death, and as long as we are alive, we do in fact "survive." This is where the "cunning of reason" demonstrates just how cunning it is. While each of us is busy surviving, busy "making a life" for ourselves (and consequently unrelentingly moving toward our inevitable death), what we are *actually* doing is sustaining and continuing and developing the life of Reason. We die, but Reason lives on through our accomplishments, whether large or small. Because, after all, if we "survive" at all, both as a species and as individuals, it is by the strength of our wits, by our use of Reason. Moreover, that which we produce by Reason returns to Reason after we are gone, to be taken up by others.

This is the true and proper end of human life, the production and return of Reason upon itself. The Purpose of Reason is its own self-production or self-actualization, as Hegel writes in *EL*, § 212, Addition:

In the sphere of the finite we can neither experience nor see that the Purpose is genuinely attained. The accomplishing of the infinite Purpose consists therefore only in sublating the illusion that it has not yet been accomplished. The Good – the ab-

8. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. by A. V. Miller (New York: Humanities, 1969), p. 743; hereafter cited as 'SL'.

solute Good – fulfils itself eternally in the world, and the result is that it is already fulfilled in and for itself, and does not need to wait upon us for this to happen. This is the illusion in which we live, and at the same time it is *this illusion alone that is the activation upon which our interest in the world rests*.

It is here, perhaps, that we have the strongest and most poignant expression of why Reason must use all of its cunning to actualize itself in the world; in other words, in order to survive. For although Hegel writes that the absolute Good "does not need to wait upon us" in order to fulfil itself, this is not to say that the absolute Good can be accomplished *without* us. He simply recognizes what all of us recognize in our more lucid moments: We would be "absolute fools" to proclaim arrogantly for ourselves the achievement of the absolute Good. History has shown all too often that those who have made this claim have been dismally and tragically wrong. However, Hegel's genius consists in showing us that even despite this, the absolute Good remains the ultimate reality we seek even despite ourselves. The Good does not "wait upon us" because it cannot exist outside of us, but rather must pass *through* us in order to accomplish itself. It posits itself through our constant striving toward a better life, and thereby is itself the object of that striving. It is in this sense that the Absolute is both the subject and the object of human life. It is also in this sense that what would otherwise appear as the futility of human striving takes on the character and distinction of absolute worth: the means by which the Good is actualized in the world.

I could conceivably stop here but I fear that (on the condition of having been successful) I will have provided an interesting argument only to those already seduced by Hegel's vision. Of course, this is not a bad thing in itself. However, part of the task I have assigned myself in this paper is to show that Hegel does have something to say to those who wish to deny any reference to any Absolute, Hegelian or other, in the name of the free, conscious, and fully *responsible* nature of human action in the world. Indeed, part of my claim is that this is an *essential* feature of Hegel's position. If this has not become obvious it is because, in explicating the notion of the "cunning of reason," I have put the emphasis on the intelligibility of such a notion as the self-actualization of Reason in the world through the accomplishments and products of human life. In other words, it might appear that I am more concerned with Reason than I am with human life. This is understandable but wrong. So what I must show now is not so much how human beings are *duped* into contributing to the self-actualization of Reason, but how they actually do, *make* that contribution.

Hegel is often accused of quietism. Indeed such a charge is to be expected, given, for example, the claim Hegel makes (discussed above) about how the Good is eternally accomplishing itself in the world. This kind of talk has led a recent critic to claim that Hegel has taken the Leibnizian idea of the "best of all possible worlds" to its greatest heights by taking away responsibility from individual human beings and giving it to Reason. Thus, according to this critic, Hegel becomes one of the great apologists of modern individualism, because it is by their full self-preoccupation with their private worlds that individuals assure themselves of the self-development of the public good.<sup>9</sup> However interesting, such a reading is inaccurate, of course, because what the

idea of the "cunning of reason" has shown is that is precisely *by means* of responsible human actions that Reason actualizes itself.

In order to clarify this, it is perhaps useful to remind ourselves that Hegel is not *prescribing* the course of history but *describing* its accomplishment. History, as any historian will tell you, has nothing to do with prescription and prediction. This is an important point, insofar as the misunderstanding of Hegel here is characteristic of a wider misunderstanding of the peculiar nature of *history* as such, that is, of what it is that makes the historical process specifically *historical*.

O'Brien, in his excellent book on Hegel's philosophy of history, draws our attention to this fact: "Despite the lack of explicit reference to the understanding in *Reason in History*, it is essential that we realize that the doctrine of *reason* in history is implicitly set against what [Hegel] is rejecting: a doctrine of understanding in history."<sup>10</sup> The understanding, which deals with abstract universals, is thereby ill-equipped to deal with the *concrete* "events" of history, i.e., the doings and sufferings of human beings. All of this suggests that in *our* discussion so far we have concentrated too much on the *end* or result of history and not enough on the *process* of history. What we have to do is show that the process is in fact what the end or result is all about. But before we do that, let us see, in Hegel's words, precisely what this result has been:

What is null and vanishing constitutes only the surface of the world, not its genuine essence. This essence is the Concept that is in and for itself, and so the world is itself the Idea. The unsatisfied striving vanishes when we (re)cognize that the final purpose of the world is just as much accomplished as it is eternally accomplishing itself. This is in general the outlook of the mature person, whereas youth believes that the world is in an utterly sorry state, and that something quite different must be made of it. On the other hand, the religious consciousness regards the world as governed by divine Providence and hence as corresponding to what it ought to be. This agreement between is and ought is not rigid and unmoving, however, since the final purpose of the world, the Good, only *is*, because it constantly brings itself about; and there is still this distinction between the spiritual and the natural worlds: that, whilst the latter continues simply to return into itself, there is certainly a progression taking place in the former as well. (*EL*, § 234, Addition)

It is within this context that Hegel's (in)famous claim that what is rational is real, what is real is rational, must be understood. As Hegel says above, the "agreement between is and ought is not rigid and unmoving." How can it be? It is the continuing process of the world as it progressively unfolds itself. This process is *synonymous with human history*.

With this shift in perspective – away from Reason as a *result*, to human history as a *process*, even though these are simply two ways of expressing the same reality – we will be in a better position to respond to those who are concerned with the "dignity" of the individual's struggle for free and responsi-

9. Alain Renaut, *L'ère de l'individu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 201-210.

10. George Dennis O'Brien, *Hegel on Reason and History: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 72.



ble existence. For it is clear that the major objection to Hegel's grand vision of reality is that it seems to leave precious little room for the individual freedom each of us claims to exercise. I think I have presented enough evidence to show that Hegel does *not* hold a "puppet-show" view of human existence. On the contrary, if it were not for human accomplishments Reason itself would not exist. What we want to know now, however, is what role individual freedom has to play in Hegel's grand scheme.

The short answer is, of course: everything. For if human beings were not free to do whatever they wanted, why would Reason have to exercise *cunning* in order to get them to do what *it* wants? As we have seen, what Reason wants is what human beings ultimately want even though they, for the most part, do not realize this – that is, not until they stop and reflect on what it is they are doing. In fact, this is precisely what Hegel's whole philosophy proposes to do: *to stop and reflect on what it is we are doing*. Then, and only then, will we be in a position to recognize that what we have been doing all along is *realizing reason in history*. We do this through our concrete actions.

What, then, is the structure of these actions that we as human beings undertake? First of all, our actions always take place within a determinate context. While this context limits what we are capable of undertaking, it still does not tell us what to undertake. Herein lies the sphere of freedom. It is important to point out that freedom is primarily something we *exercise*, not primarily something we *possess*. Thus, free action consists in a self-determined response within a specific "context" (understood as an articulated – or to-be-articulated – set of parameters of relevance). Hegel calls this "context" *actuality*. Our actions all take place within an actual world. What we are faced with in the actual world are concrete possibilities. Which are we to choose? The fact that these possibilities must be mediated through concrete human choice is what effectively establishes this claim to freedom.

All of this is fairly straightforward. However, what we want to do is understand how our freedom *actually* works within this framework. Hegel does this by considering the logical categories that make it up. They are, as we have seen, actuality and possibility; but we must also consider necessity and contingency. A complete examination of these categories is obviously beyond the scope of this paper. We will restrict ourselves to considering them in relation to human action.

The context within which human action takes place is, as mentioned above, *actuality*. The first thing Hegel warns us about is "the confusion of actuality with what is tangible and immediately perceptible" (EL, § 142, Addition). This is appearance, of course, and not true actuality. Paul Owen Johnson, in a recent commentary on Hegel's *Science of Logic*, elaborates: "The actual is the inner which has externalized itself, the potency which has actualized itself, the essence which exists, or has appeared. It is therefore not to be confused with mere external existence, or what is commonly called reality."<sup>11</sup> The actual is that which springs out of the undifferentiated world of possibility. That is, the actual world is a particular configuration of possibility as actual. Thus, possibility gives rise to actuality. So far so good. However, as Hegel points out, if it

were not for actuality, possibility would never come to be.<sup>12</sup> This is where human action comes in. It actualizes possibility. But not just any possibility: the possibilities implicit within any given actuality. This is why actuality is a more concrete category than possibility, for, Hegel tells, "it contains possibility within itself as an abstract moment" (EL, § 143, Addition). Not all possibilities can be possible at a given time because otherwise possibility would never be able to give rise to actuality. Because actuality is more concrete than possibility – because it is actual – we can discern *which* possibilities have been effectively actualized. This is the task of concrete human action: to concretely actualize the implicit possibilities of the world. All this seems pretty reasonable. However, it is the next (logical) step which causes all the problems, so we will have to look at it carefully. Hegel maintains that the relation between possibility and actuality leads to the next logical category because: "Whether this or that is possible or impossible depends on the content, i.e., on the totality of moments of Actuality, an Actuality which, in the unfolding of its moments, proves to be Necessity" (EL, § 143, Addition).

At this point, one may want to object that since we are here concerned with human action, we will only be misled if we follow Hegel on his "logical" meanderings. There is obviously much truth to the idea that the exercise of freedom is, in a sense, "determined" by the context in which it finds itself. But this does not mean that "determination" here carries the sense of "necessity."

However, in defense of Hegel, it should be emphasized that the reference to "necessity" is not to a formal or abstract necessity but, if one may put it this way, a *concrete* necessity. What this means is that we must try to conceive of necessity within the concrete world of actuality as actualized possibility. What Hegel is trying to show is that actuality is made up of realized or determinate possibilities, and that the possibilities which end up "making it" into actuality are to be seen as, in an important sense, *necessary*; necessary because those possibilities are the only possible ones, given the structured characteristics of particular circumstances, or "context". Thus, the answer to the question asked above about *which* concrete possibilities are we to choose, are the *only* ones we discern can be *effectively* actualized. Actualized possibility is *real* possibility. As Hegel writes in SL, p. 549:

What is necessary *cannot be otherwise*; but what is simply *possible* can; for possibility is the in itself that is only positedness and therefore essentially otherness. Formal possibility is this identity as transition into a sheer other; but real possibility, because it contains the other moment, actuality, is already itself necessity. Therefore what is really possible can no longer be otherwise; under the particular conditions and circumstances something else cannot follow. Real possibility and necessity are therefore

11. Paul Owen Johnson, *The Critique of Thought: A Re-examination of Hegel's "Science of Logic"* (Avebury: Gower Publishing Co. Ltd., 1988), p. 139.

12. For both the negative and the positive determinations of "possibility" cf. John Burbidge, "The Necessity of Contingency: An Analysis of Hegel's Chapter on 'Actuality' in the *Science of Logic*" in *Art and Logic in Hegel's Philosophy*, ed. by Warren E. Steinkraus and Kenneth L. Schmitz (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980). For example: "The possible is the ground of the actual. As ground, however, it is not simply other than the actual, for it is, implicitly, what the actual is explicitly. This identity of the implicit and the explicit defines the positive sense of possibility, while its distinction from the actual provides its negative determination" (p. 202).

only *seemingly* different; this is an identity which does not have to *become* but is already *presupposed* and lies at their base.

Part of what is being said here is that we should not conceive of necessity as some kind of constraining force, as something fixed and unyielding. Nor, of course, should we think of necessity as confined to tautologous propositions. What we have to do is try to conceive of "necessity" as embodied in the actual world. In order to obtain a full picture of the matter we must introduce yet another category, namely: contingency. Human action, viewed from the *inside* as it were, is implicitly possibility, insofar as actuality is actualized possibility. Human action, viewed from the outside, is contingency.<sup>13</sup> That such-and-such was done at such-and-such time is a matter of contingent fact, when viewed from the outside. To say that the world is as it is as a matter of contingent fact is precisely to view the world from the outside. This, however, is *not* the point of view of human action. Human action, that is, effective human action, deals with the world *as it is*, i.e., as actual, as actualized possibility. It cannot deal with "mere" possibilities or be overly concerned with the multiple contingencies that surround it (I have to finish this paper, and it does not matter if my socks are brown or blue or both). Human action must deal with the concrete world and its exigencies. It must deal only with those possibilities which are "necessary" (*really* or effectively possible) in order to actualize that which it seeks to achieve. As we have seen, what is meant by "necessary" here is that which exhibits *real* possibility or, what amounts to the same thing, actuality.<sup>14</sup> This is precisely what human action seeks to achieve. Insofar as it is rational, it seeks to achieve the possibilities implicit within the actual or, in other words, to actualize the implicit possibilities within the given actuality, which, because it contains those unactualized possibilities, is not yet fully actual. This is the movement of actuality, which is the movement of human activity, which is history. In what sense can this movement be called necessary? In the sense that actuality negates mere possibility by determining and realizing what can only be characterized as *real* possibility, and *real* possibility is nothing other than "necessity," that is, those possibilities *effectively* realized in the course of time. (Some such notion is implicit in the expression that a decision or policy is "moving in the direction" of history. What is meant is, not moving toward a predetermined end, even if ultimately unattainable, but as *effectively* responding to current exigencies.)

But could not it still be argued that, on this account, action is limited and determined to bring about *real* possibility and nothing else, such that calling human action "free" in this case is limiting it to the acceptance of the world as it is? If this is the movement of history, how can we avoid seeing it as, at bottom, a blind process in which our actions can be said to be our own only in the sense that we are the unwitting agents of that process?

Hegel recognizes that necessity is often understood as "blind" and he says that "this is quite right, in as much as *Purpose* is still not present *explicitly* as such in the process of necessity" (EL, § 147, Addition). As we all know, human activity is purposive activity, and thus "if we consider purposive activity,

13. For the inside-outside metaphor, cf. Robin G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946), pp. 113-122.

14. As Burbidge remarks (p. 208): "Reflection on real possibility shows that it is not possible to be both a *real* possibility of an actuality, and yet be distinct from that actuality as possibility."

then the content is a purpose of which we knew beforehand, so that the activity is not blind but sighted" (EL, § 147, Addition). So, what Hegel is actually saying is that, if we view actuality as the product of human activity, we can see that *implicit* within a necessary process (the continuous collapse and rearticulation of reality) is a process which must be understood as suffused with purpose. Thus, the supposed blind necessity of the historical process as outlined above will be overcome if, and only if, that process becomes self-conscious. Only, that is, if human beings take the responsibility of their own actions into their own hands and try to *see* what possibilities are contained in the actual world in which they find themselves.

Necessity is blind only insofar as it is not comprehended, and hence there is nothing more absurd than the reproach of blind fatalism that is levelled against the Philosophy of History *because it regards the cognition of the necessity of what has happened as its proper task*. In this perspective, the philosophy of History takes on the significance of a theodicy; and those who think to honour divine Providence by excluding necessity from it, actually degrade Providence by this abstraction to the level of blind, irrational arbitrariness. (EL, § 147, Addition; emphasis added)

Of course, this "cognition" of necessity is nothing other than the recognition of the cunning of Reason which, in the face of what seem like insurmountable odds (i.e., the greed, stupidity, and pettiness of human beings; awesome natural forces, etc.), still manages to come out on top, insofar as action is still possible in this world. There are still implicit possibilities waiting to be actualized by those who have the "cunning" to recognize them. Only those who actually see themselves as embodying these possibilities will in fact be able to actualize them.

Thus the fear of those who think that Hegel takes away all responsibility and freedom from individuals is ill-founded. Indeed, the whole project of the philosophy of history, of the idea of the "cunning of reason" is aimed at showing that no matter how desperate or absurd or meaningless the world can appear at times, it remains a world in which responsible and free action can, does, and must take place, as long as there are human beings around to undertake it. Our freedom lies not in our ability to do whatever we want, whenever we want. If that were the case, it would not be long before we were smitten by forces we would be incapable of recognizing. No, our freedom lies in the fact that we have the capacity to recognize and understand what we do, and thus to guide and attune our actions to and within a world in which we continuously discover ourselves to be participating. So, what the doctrine of the "cunning of reason" does is not to deny human freedom, but to affirm it by enabling us to understand that "when we recognize that whatever happens to us is only an evolution of our own selves, and that we carry only the burden of our own debts, we behave as free men, and whatever may befall us, we keep the firm faith that nothing unjust can happen to us" (EL, § 147, Addition).

This reference to "faith" reminds me of something Collingwood once wrote. He tells that human rationality (which he insists is by no means a given) depends on the belief in two simple articles of faith. The first is



theoretical and consists simply in believing that the universe as a whole is rational, intelligible, meaningful. The second is practical:

[It] consists in the certainty that life is worth living, that the world in which we have been unwillingly thrust is a world that contains scope for action and will give a fair chance of showing what we are made of; a world in which, if we turn out to be complete failures, we should have only ourselves to blame. Practical faith means "accepting the universe" or, what is the same thing, knowing that we are free.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, for all the apparent abstractness that the concept of an "Absolute Idea" has at first glance, its use is an attempt to reconcile us to the world. Not in the sense of abandoning us to its mysterious forces, nor by reducing us to a rational but mechanical principle. Rather, the point is we do have a place *within* the world, and it is a self-conscious place, won by the collective effort which sustains and enhances the recognition of that place as far as we have been able and willing. This is not an easy task in the best of times. The genius – and dare I say *cunning* – of Hegel has been to show us that, even in the worst of times, the very possibility of our self-consciousness serves as a guarantee that our place in the world is secured. Perhaps the task of the philosopher is precisely to help keep that possibility alive.

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15. Robin G. Collingwood, *Faith and Reason*, (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1967), p. 141.

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Hegelian/Whiteheadian Perspectives*. By Darrel E. Christensen. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1989. Pp. xxx + 338. \$28.75 cloth; \$17.25 pbk. ISBN 0-8191-7078-X cloth; 0-8191-7079-8 pbk.

This collection of fifteen philosophical essays, principally prepared between 1974 and 1987, is an indispensable complement to Darrel E. Christensen's major work on the Hegel-Whitehead relation, *The Search for Concreteness: Reflections on Hegel and Whitehead* (hereafter 'SC'), which appeared only two years earlier (cf. George Lucas' review in *The Owl*, 20, 2 [Spring 1989]: 210-216). The problematic of the earlier work was predominantly "methodological," the intent having been to outline an authentically "critical" approach to fundamental issues of epistemology and metaphysics from a "somewhat Hegelian perspective." The present work, building out from SC, is mainly devoted to a historical "dialogue" between his original Hegel appropriation and reconstruction and some representative streams of contemporary philosophy. This is on the basis of his assumption, shared by the reviewer, that today's most helpful contribution to Hegelianism can no longer consist in entanglements in "potentially endless interpretative debate of a sort that would be found of interest only to a few specialists," so much as in bringing out "something of the import of Hegel's work" "in confrontation with competing philosophical orientations" (p. xviii). Such a confrontation cannot, of course, be fruitful apart from having previously made clear what aspects or tenets of Hegel's philosophy are being appropriated. This clearly presupposes the development of a consistent Hegel interpretation (although not of that excessively narrow philological sort of which Christensen is rightfully critical), to which especially the preface along with Essays I and XI offer an invaluable contribution. In the last two parts of the work (Essays IX-XV) he presents his readers with a somewhat detailed account of his position with respect to much debated issues in contemporary thought such as the "philosophy of language" and "cultural relativity." This seems to me to be very likely the most original and up-to-date contribution to philosophy to be found in all of his philosophical work. In fact, as I shall presently show, although never departing from a close commitment to Hegelian principles, his reflections on these subjects seem to go a little, at least, toward justifying his claim to have advanced "first philosophy" somewhat "beyond" Hegel (cf. p. xi).